Sopavi Kao

Professor Jeremy Kaye

English M13

11 December 2025

Son, Brother, Good Fellow: The Transmasculinity of Jo March

"I can't get over my disappointment in not being a boy," Jo March laments in the first chapter of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* (9). This statement is core to Jo's character throughout the novel as she rejects her girlhood and instead aligns herself with masculinity. Jo's masculine inclinations are often interpreted as yearning for the freedom provided by manhood, a product of the social rigidity required of women during the 1860s rather than the genuine *wanting* to be a man. However, her close identification with the male gender throughout the novel provides a more queer possibility, wherein she experiences gender dysphoria in being a woman. Here, Jo March's rejection of womanhood stems from a transmasculine identity rather than mere tomboyishness.

The term "transgender" was coined in 1965 by John F. Oliven, nearly a century after *Little Women* was published (PFLAG). The term generally refers to a person whose gender identity does not align with their biological sex. "Transmasculine" is more specific, identifying people assigned female at birth who transition to a masculine-presenting gender. Although Alcott couldn't have written Jo with this particular label in mind, many aspects of Jo's identity resonate with a modern understanding of transmasculinity. Jo defies and rejects all conventions of her perceived female gender while revelling in the idea of inhabiting a body of the opposite masculine sex.

In the novel's opening conversation, Jo's sister admonishes her for whistling; she exclaims, "Don't, Jo. It's so boyish!"—to which Jo replies: "That's why I do it" (8). The pleasure that Jo finds in acting as a boy is akin to gender euphoria, which is defined by PFLAG as the joy experienced "when one's gender is recognized and respected by others, when one's body aligns with one's gender, or when one expresses themselves in accordance with their gender.". Although her boyish performances sometimes seem to be enjoyable merely for the reactions they provoke, Jo is eager, just as she is pleased, to step into the roles of men: she repeatedly asserts herself as a man in order to obtain this sense of euphoria. Jo proudly tells her sisters, "I'm the man of the family now Papa is away…for he told me to take special care of mother while he was gone" (10). She is able to "[play] male parts to her heart's content" in their Christmas performance, taking "immense satisfaction in a pair of russet leather boots" as she acts in these male roles (20). Her performance emphasizes this idea of gender euphoria, as Jo delights in showing off being a boy in an acceptable manner while wearing her manly boots. Gender becomes a performance for Jo, where she must make certain that she is known as a boy. Already, Jo has a "gentlemanly demeanor" and forgets that she is a girl—she can only try to make everybody else forget as well (31).

Jo's longing to be a boy works in conjunction with her misery over being a girl, presenting similar to the experience of gender dysphoria. Gender dysphoria is defined by PFLAG as "the distress caused when a person's assigned sex at birth and assumed gender is not the same as the one with which they identify." Like many transgender people, Jo renounces her birth-given name, declaring "Josephine" as too "sentimental". In rejecting her womanhood, Jo refuses all notions of being "ladylike": "I hate to think I've got to grow up, and be Miss March, and wear long gowns, and look as prim as a China Aster! It's bad enough to be a girl, anyway, when I like

boy's games and work and manners!" (9). Conforming to polite society is the worst thing imaginable for Jo, who craves education and adventure and eternal childhood—all things impossible for a girl to grow into. Jo tells Laurie, "If I was a boy, we'd run away together, and have a capital time; but as I'm a miserable girl, I must be proper, and stop at home" (202). The prospect of the future looms heavy over Jo, who cannot imagine becoming a woman. She is heavily chained by her identity as a girl—both because of societal expectations and her want of being a boy. Beth attempts to comfort her: "you must try to be contented with making your name boyish, and playing brother to us girls" (9). Only, it is not enough for Jo to play pretend as she grows into herself.

Jo's "one beauty" and truly vain, feminine attribute is her hair; otherwise, she is tall, gangly, and awkward looking (10). When Jo cuts off her hair to raise money for her father, her initial expression has a "mixture of fun and fear, satisfaction and regret in it" as she proudly presents the twenty-five dollars she earned for it (158). However, when her sisters and mother begin to cry out over it ("Your hair! Your beautiful hair!" "Oh, Jo, how could you? Your one beauty."), she has to take on an "indifferent air" to stop herself from getting upset. Marmee remarks, "it was not necessary, and I'm afraid you will regret it one of these days" (159). Jo's only claim to femininity is explicitly told to her as ruined. Moreover, while she objects to Marmee's statement in regretting it, the words "not necessary" invalidate her chivalrous efforts. It is more likely that these reactions, rather than the haircut itself, are why Jo ends up crying over her hair that night. Jo's family, while dear to her, pressure her into a role of femininity that she can never succeed.

Jo's occasional disappointment in her lack of femininity stems solely from expectations pushed onto her by her misunderstanding (albeit well-meaning) family members. In her book,

Making Girls into Women, Kathryn R. Kent claims that "under the pressure of her mother's pedagogical intensity, Jo often confesses herself to be an inadequate girl or woman" (54). Marmee is the matriarch of the March family, the perfect example of woman and of motherhood, which weighs on Jo as she comes of age. Kent continues, "Jo is Marmee's problem child…Marmee inspires in Jo the desire to 'be good' and, in imitating her example, to submit to the dictates of bourgeois femininity" (49). Jo similarly hopes to live up to the expectations of her beloved father, claiming, "I'll try and be what he loves to call me, 'a little woman' and not be rough and wild, but do my duty here instead of wanting to be somewhere else" (14). Her father later comments on this effort:

> "In spite of the curly crop, I don't see the 'son Jo' whom I left a year ago…I see a young lady who pins her collar straight, laces her boots neatly, and neither whistles, talks slang, nor lies on the rug as she used to do…She doesn't bounce, but moves quietly, and takes care of a certain little person in a motherly way which delights me. I rather miss my wild girl, but if I get a strong, helpful, tenderhearted woman in her place, I shall feel quite satisfied." (211)

At this moment, "Jo's keen eyes were rather dim", and she holds "an unusually mild expression" (211). Jo's performance of femininity here is resigned—it is not her true self, instead it is crafted to please and comfort.

Jo is most herself, unabashed and boyish, in the bloomings of her friendship with Laurie. In their first meeting, Laurie is put at ease by Jo's "gentlemanly demeanor", and Jo enjoys Laurie's kindness and sensitivity. As their families blend together, Jo's jealousy of Laurie reaches beyond envying his social mobility as a wealthy bachelor; it is not resentment, but rather, envy for the whole being that he is. She closely identifies with Laurie himself in a way that is truly

loving, though unromantic; their relationship is “one of sameness” (Kent 54). Here, Jo’s feelings towards Laurie become akin to gender envy, a term defined by PFLAG as “envy for an individual's expression of gender”. Laurie and Jo are frequently described as being similar; Laurie is what Jo *could be* if she had really been born a boy (as she so often wishes). He is able to become a part of the March sisterhood while still recognized by them as a boy. When given the nickname, “Dora”, at school, he fights his classmates to be called “Laurie”, just as Jo wishes to fight against the name “Josephine”. Unfortunately for Laurie, Jo wants to *be him* more than she wants to be *with* him. Through her relationship with Laurie, Jo is able to become a boy alongside another boy. She is not relegated to sister or daughter, but is instead “a good fellow,” by Laurie’s christening (222). When Jo meets Laurie’s college friends, she “[finds] it very difficult to refrain from imitating [their] gentlemanly attitudes, phrases, and feats, which [seem] more natural to her than the decorums prescribed for young ladies” (226). Laurie’s romantic affections for her shatter this illusion of mutual boyhood, proving heterosexual rather than homosocial in their relationship. The idea of their marriage demands that “Jo must become a woman and Laurie must be transformed into a man”, robbing both of boyhood (Kent 55).

Jo is popularly seen as a reflection (or “self-insert”) of her creator, Louisa May Alcott. In an article exploring Alcott’s complicated relationship with gender, author Peyton Thomas asserts that Alcott herself may have been transmasculine. In an 1880s interview, Alcott declared, “I am more than half-persuaded that I am a man’s soul, put by some freak of nature into a woman’s body.” Like Jo, Alcott went by a boyish nickname amongst friends and family (Lou or Louy instead of Louisa), and identified herself firmly with masculinity. Similar to Jo’s self-described position as “man of the house”, Alcott “wrote of herself as the ‘papa’ or ‘father’ of her young nephews.” Jo’s father recalls her as his son, and Alcott’s father called her his “only son”. In

recognizing Alcott's projections onto Jo, especially in expressions of her complex gender identity, Jo's potential transgenderism becomes even more apparent.

Jo March is understood as one of the most beloved female characters in American literary fiction, and yet, she identifies so thoroughly with masculinity. She finds belonging in being a boy and rejects womanhood, only drawing towards femininity when it is expected of her. Recognizing Jo as a proto-transgender character through modern understandings of the transgender experience invites a broader understanding of the queerness within the character. As such, it allows us to continue to solidify the queerness as belonging within our literary history.

Works Cited

Alcott, Louisa May. *Little Women*. E-book ed. The Project Gutenberg, 2008.

Kent, Kathryn R. "'Trying All Kinds': Louisa May Alcott's Pedagogic Erotics" *Making Girls into Women*. Duke UP, 2003.

"LGBTQ+ Glossary." PFLAG, 2023, pflag.org/glossary/.

Thomas, Peyton. "Louisa May Alcott, the Author of Little Women, Identified with Manhood." *The New York Times*, 24 Dec. 2022, www.nytimes.com/2022/12/24/opinion/did-the-mother-of-young-adult-literature-identify-as-a-man.html#.